

Preface

Fostering appreciation of historic resources as worthy of preservation is dependent on people seeing them as part of their heritage, and thus worth keeping. This study thus aims to convey the larger story behind material manifestations of the past, especially those still evident in a rugged corner of the Siskiyou Mountains, so as to show their significance or value to the present. A larger goal of this Historic Resource Study is to shed additional light on how cultural perceptions of nature and the resulting trends in tourism have shaped Oregon Caves and the area around it over the span of more than a century. This is a way of attempting to break the habit, which is all too common in agency-funded historical studies, of presenting the park as an island surrounded by a sea where there is little life other than some directive coming from the administering bureau's central offices. A Historic Resource Study should also allow for showing how larger forces (in this case, those beyond the NPS) have affected a place like Oregon Caves and in so doing, allow for building a "land bridge" between the monument and the social, political, and economic patterns governing its historical context.

Despite the name "Oregon Caves," this national monument contains only one cave system. It is located in southwest Oregon, just seven miles north of the state's border with California and some 50 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean. Road access to the coast, however, is limited since the topography is so steep and

daunting that the access road (SR 46, the Oregon Caves Highway) is the only unit of state highway system to terminate with a dead end. Trails penetrate further into the mountainous Siskiyou hinterland, most of which is characterized by complex geology and enclaves of mixed-conifer forest. Ranging from 3,680 to 5,280 feet above sea level over just 480 acres, the monument proper (eight acres are located in the town of Cave Junction) is dominated by an overstory of Douglas-fir and other species like Port Orford-cedar, amid small streams or seasonal drainages. A total of some 400 individual plant species in such a small area indicate that conditions are suitable for some endemic flora and fauna. The endemic animals, however, are found within the cave system which consists largely of limestone and marble.

Despite the remote setting of Oregon Caves National Monument, it has occupied a prominent place in the identity of people living in the surrounding area. Promotion of the Oregon Caves included formation of a booster group in Grants Pass, the seat of Josephine County, where members of the "Oregon Cavemen" were linked with the concession company which operated the guide service and other commercial visitor services at the monument from 1923 to 1976. Overseen first by the U.S. Forest Service and later by the National Park Service, the company set important precedents in developing the cave entrance area into a resort containing a hotel, cabins, and other structures within a visually unified designed landscape. One of these structures exemplified the use of "rustic architecture" so well that it achieved the status of national historic landmark in 1987.

National historic landmarks are afforded the highest level of protection in accordance with direction from Congress under the Historic Sites Act of 1935 to "preserve for public use historic sites, buildings, and objects of national significance." Passage of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in 1966 came with the directive to federal agencies in Section 110 they should nominate all eligible properties (such as sites, structures, districts and objects) under their administrative control to the National Register of Historic Places established by NHPA. This Historic Resource Study is a tool for identifying important properties that qualify for listing on the National Register, as well as relevant themes or "historic contexts," so that managers at the monument can meet their obligations under Section 110 of NHPA; that is, to list eligible properties. Congress did not dedicate funding specifically for this

purpose, and given the reality of some bureaus managing millions of acres, the task of inventory and evaluation is still ongoing. Listing of federal properties (which can range from locally to nationally significant) on the National Register has thus tended to be sporadic, especially in the wake of identifying new property types sometimes far removed from the historic buildings that traditionally have dominated the National Register and its more rarified subset of national historic landmarks.

Amendments to NHPA in 1992 removed the need for comprehensive studies and inventory efforts aimed at complying with Section 110 within a set timeframe. Despite that fact, the National Park Service (NPS) continues to undertake assessments of historic resources (generally defined as eligible for the National Register) associated with the park areas it manages. Such undertakings seem to work well in small units like Oregon Caves, especially when they are preceded by context studies written with an eye to the National Register. The most pertinent to Oregon Caves of the latter group is a study by Linda McClelland in 1996 which covered the national park system and facilities in some state parks. This work was subsequently published two years later under the title *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). McClelland focused on the period between 1916 and 1942, a time when rustic architecture and naturalistic landscapes dominated the design of facilities at Oregon Caves National Monument and other park areas.

McClelland's study supplied context for understanding the breadth of historic resources in national and state parks in the aforementioned period of significance, but it did not offer guidance in formatting subsequent National Register nominations—particularly where resources such as roads and trails are linear in character. This is why nominations of historic properties such as the Oregon Caves Historic District highlighted the buildings and their immediate surroundings as designed landscapes. These have not extended beyond the confines of a polygon drawn to indicate the boundaries of what is “historic” as opposed to what lies beyond it—in many cases the latter is most of a park area which is often classified in this type of zoning as “natural.”

As of 2004, concern about historic properties at Oregon Caves has, for the most part, remained within a rather oddly shaped polygon that embraces the seven contributing resources

(five buildings and two structures) in the existing historic district.¹ Evaluation of the road and trail system developed between 1916 and 1942 has heretofore not taken place, nor has the identification of contributing resources associated with contexts that are outside of historic landscape design associated with the interwar period. Identifying contributing elements and historic properties in general is generally tied to the four main National Register criteria. These are: (A) those properties associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of American history; or (B) properties associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or (C) properties that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic value, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or (D) properties that have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.²

The NPS has developed a thematic framework to address the breadth of most, if not all, historic resources that might need to be assessed against the four main National Register criteria. Locally relevant themes or their facets can be derived from the framework, as might a period of significance. Although the two most recent thematic frameworks have varied drastically with respect to their level of detail, they still form a framework in which to fit a historic property and then evaluate it for possible listing on the National Register.³ As such, listing is an acknowledgment by the federal agency that a historic property is worthy of preservation. It does not preclude changes or even demolition, but managers must follow prescribed steps in what is called the “Section 106 process” in order to assess an undertaking’s effect on a historic property and then mitigate it if the effect is adverse.

Perhaps more important than what this study can provide in identifying and evaluating properties eligible for the National Register is how it serves the purpose of interpreting the past. The study is limited to a relatively short span of time, one reflected in the archival record that emphasizes how Oregon Caves became a functioning part of the local economy and the infrastructure needed to support tourism and park management. Nevertheless, even a small national monument located in the hinterland of southwest Oregon has much to convey about the changing nature of heritage and the efforts to preserve it.